



Environment Policy Essentials: Recovering our seas

Wales's 2,700 km of coastline are globally known for their beauty and biodiversity, yet the picture below the waves is much less positive. Vulnerable ecosystems are facing a growing number of pressures, such as developments, overfishing, bottom trawling, pollution from land-based sources, and shipping.

What's the state of our seas now?

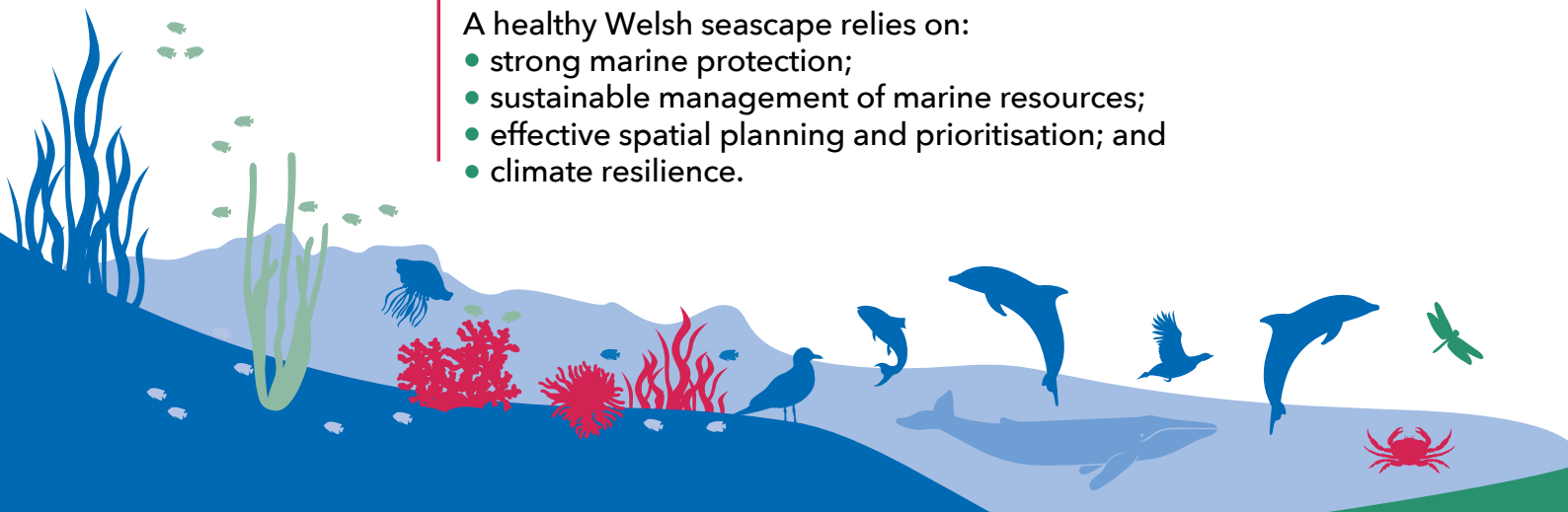
Welsh marine ecosystems face significant pressures, with around half of assessed habitats and species ('features') in Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in unfavourable condition. The causes of this are varied, with poor water quality and climate change playing significant roles.

The anticipated increase in marine development (for example, offshore renewable energy) will need careful management. Improving ecosystem resilience will require: a focus on species recovery, MPA designation and management improvements, wider habitat restoration and a reduction in pollution and other environmental pressures.

A Nature Rich Future for our Sea: What is a healthy seascape?

A healthy Welsh seascape relies on:

- strong marine protection;
- sustainable management of marine resources;
- effective spatial planning and prioritisation; and
- climate resilience.







A completed network of well-managed MPAs, good water quality, and nature-sensitive marine planning help ecosystems and wildlife thrive alongside human activities. Seabirds and other species are protected through biosecurity measures and targeted conservation strategies, while Remote Electronic Monitoring supports sustainable fisheries management. Protecting blue carbon habitats helps address climate change, and nature-based solutions improve the resilience of coastal communities to flooding and erosion.

What tools do we have?

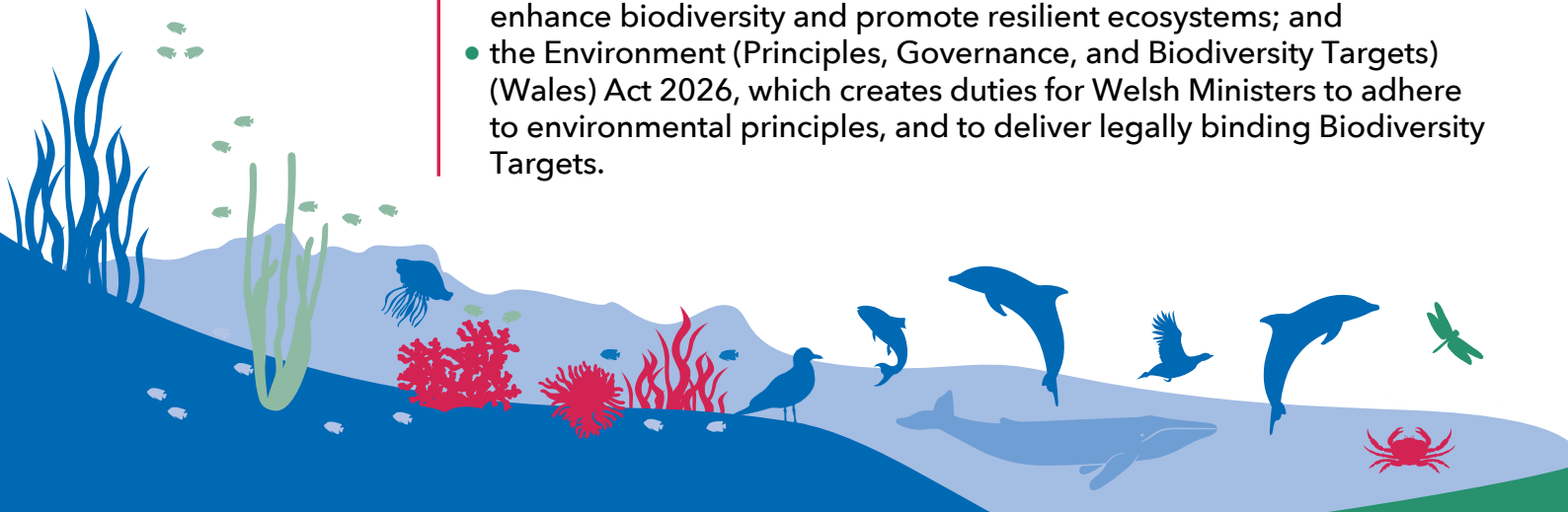
In Wales, marine biodiversity and conservation are protected through a combination of UK and Welsh legislation. UK legislation includes:



- the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 - this established a framework for marine planning, licensing, and the creation of Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs), and gave Welsh Ministers powers over marine planning within Welsh waters;
- the UK Marine Strategy Regulations 2010 – which requires the implementation of measures to achieve "Good Environmental Status"; and
- the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 – these protect important habits and species.

Welsh legislation includes:

- the Environment (Wales) Act 2016, which strengthens biodiversity protection by placing a duty on public authorities to maintain and enhance biodiversity and promote resilient ecosystems; and
- the Environment (Principles, Governance, and Biodiversity Targets) (Wales) Act 2026, which creates duties for Welsh Ministers to adhere to environmental principles, and to deliver legally binding Biodiversity Targets.





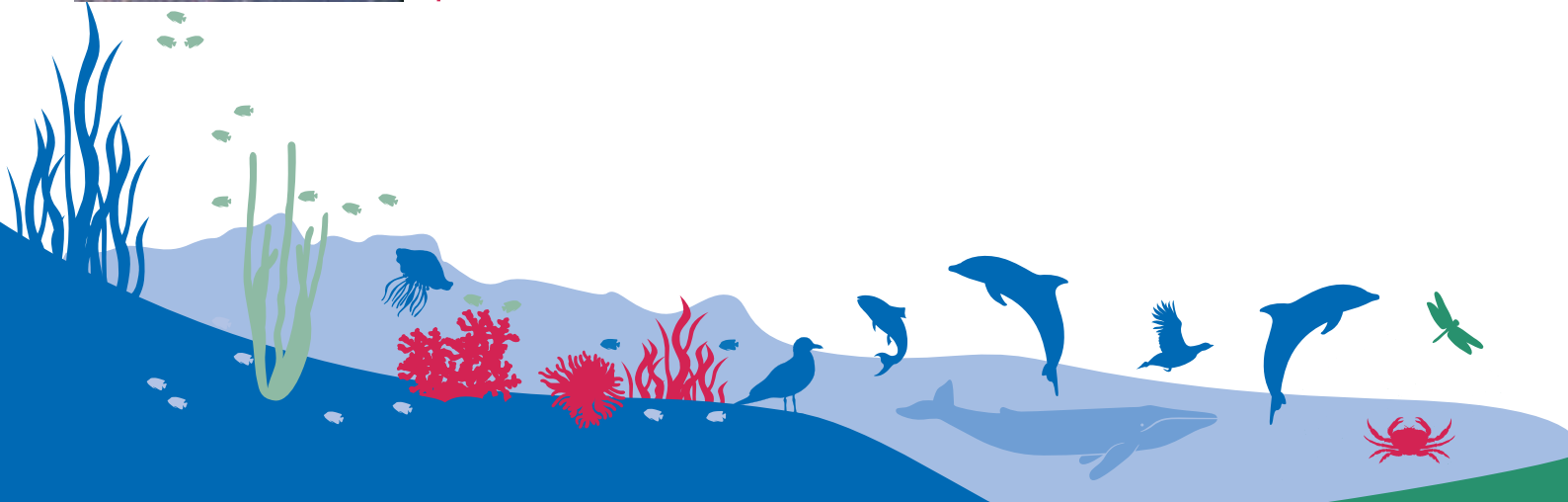


Together, these laws should support marine conservation, sustainable resource use, and long-term ecosystem resilience in Wales. However, they are not being sufficiently acted upon.

What do we need to see from Welsh Government to tackle the nature crisis at sea?

- Complete the MPA network through the designation of more MCZs, supporting the recovery of our seas and the achievement of 'Good Environmental Status'.
- Ensure the completed MPA network addresses shortfalls in protection of habitats and features. At least 30% of Wales's seas must be within highly protected MPAs and match the category 2 of designation under the international MPA Guide, within the context of wider ecologically coherent networks. At least 10% should be within fully protected areas, with a whole-site approach.
- Ensure all MPA features – and where relevant, entire sites – are in favourable or recovering condition, supported by long-term funding for management, monitoring, enforcement, and restoration.
- Complete the Welsh Government's Spatial Assessment of Welsh seas and to use it to develop a prioritisation framework to sit alongside the Welsh National Marine Plan.
- Implement and fund species recovery actions, including those within the Seabird Conservation Strategy.
- Streamline the marine licensing process, ensuring it is accessible to community groups and enable the roll out of nature-based solutions at scale to adapt to climate change and marine biodiversity recovery.





Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environment, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.

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